

THE THRILLING ADVENTURES OF DICK ANTHONY OF ARRAN

By
TALBOT MUNDY

Dick Anthony of Arran, a young man of the Caspian. On a tongue of land that stretched out through the marsh to make the only landing place two men fought savagely, with tearing fingers—hot hissing, face to face.

From out of the mist to seaward came the unexpected, deadened thump of oars, but the two fought on.

A sail developed out of the immeasurable haze. It swayed and grew nearer, silent, sleek, shadowy.

A rudder gurgled as an angle changed. But the two on shore lay locked in their hate—dead, dumb—oblivious, except to blood lust.

The creaking of the weary oars began again, and a heavy-beamed unpeopled native craft crept shoreward, head on, to the slow flap of an unfilled sail.

A giant leaped from the bows, face forward, ready for happenings. He caught the hellish rasp of breath, fought for between clenched fingers, and leaned forward with one hand to his ear.

"They'll be fighting," Mr. Dick, close at hand.

"Make fast then and wait for me!"

The giant dragged the anchor overboard, and plunged it into clay with one sweep of his tremendous arms. The action was instant, but he had not finished before another man stood beside him, who surely seemed lord of all he looked at; stood and looked as Viking never did—for the Vikings were slaves to superstition, and this man, Dick Anthony, was free. He had a strange old claymore hung to his side.

Dick stopped, and stooped to look closer into a patch of trampled grass. Andy MacDougal crouched behind him like a well-trained hound in leash. Dick seized a human leg and tugged at it; but there was no response.

Andy moved and chose another leg from out the tangle. He pulled as if he were helping to get an anchor up, and the instant they were wrenched apart each turned over his shoulder, numb, dumb, breathless—they had split enough remaining to be dangerous. Dick had to kneel on his man and squeeze the fight out of him.

Andy carried his half-throated savage to the water's edge and ducked him until he was too weak to remonstrate; then he laid him on the grass.

"See you?" he grinned, pointing. Dick followed the direction of his finger, stooped where the grass had been trampled by the fighting, and picked up a little leather bag.

At the same instant, at the sight of the same small bag in Dick's hands, the men who had fought to a stalemate recovered breath, will, reason, or at least instinct. Instinctively Dick and Andy glanced, each to make sure that the other was alert. They glanced back, and there was nothing where the two had been; they had vanished like frightened animals.

"Did the bag have a deal of silver in it?" wondered Andy.

"Gold," said Dick.

From the boat that had borne them out of unexpectedness the rowers and their chief—eight men in turbans—were pitching their belongings to the shore in hurried silence.

"Do you happen to recognize this place, Usheb Ali Khan?" Dick asked.

"Nay, sahib! But 'recognize dry land and know that Allah made it!'"

"Would you care to sail farther, and try for a better landing?"

"God forbid, sahib! The Afghan stepped ashore, and bowed his steepest."

"Didn't like it, eh?"

"May devils rot the boat and Russians ride in it!" swore Usheb Ali Khan.

"Russian gunboats are scouring the Caspian now for a sight of it," said Dick. Andy picked up his ears; Usheb Ali Khan stroked his black beard, and his seven waited silently in line, as became the henchmen of a warrior.

"Burn the boat, Andy!" ordered Dick. A moment later smoke came from the half-decked-over afterpart. Two minutes more, and a tangle of flame licked up. They watched until a Caspian ripple lapped over the sizzling bulwarks like the lip of Nemesis, and there was nothing left but embers staining the smooth sea.

Dick turned to see eight Afghans with their hilts thrust out toward him. At a word from Usheb Khan they drew. Eight blades shot upward, shimmering in the morning sun. Eight eyes of level, Asiatic eyes looked into Dick's.

And so, in the cool of a Trans-Caspian morning, the last of the Trans-Caspian took his first steel-tipped salute, and answered it. The clanging of the hilts went to his own lips, and he knew then that he and these eight men stood pledged in the bond unbreakable—the soldier's.

It was Andy who broke the spell.

"What's your name, sahib?"

"A horse," said Dick. "A horse grazing."

Eight of the ten had been war taught in the trick of looking quickly; Andy had learned of all the boys was squandering before ever I met you to befriend you if I could as a matter of business policy. The business policy remains, but a very strong element of personal regard is added to the motive for the offer I will make."

He sat back and looked away, as if he expected Dick to arise and answer him; but Dick still sat still; so after a minute he continued:

"Reasoning along the line that the Okhrana would not make such frantic efforts to capture a nonentity, I decided before ever I met you to befriend you if I could as a matter of business policy. The business policy remains, but a very strong element of personal regard is added to the motive for the offer I will make."

He might have been addressing three Supreme Court Judges. All three looked interested, and Dick by no means least of them; but Lancaster felt like the pleader for a weak cause. Instead of what he was ac-

tually—a man of influence with influence to offer, at a price. Not one of the three was inattentive or indifferent. Yet no three men he had ever met had looked so noncommittal.

"You said you have never heard of the Okhrana. It is the secret police of Russia. The Okhrana is the devil, busy about building hell—and the hell is here, in Persia, Mr. Anthony!"

Dick sat a little straighter, but said nothing.

"I invite you to wage war on this devil, Mr. Anthony—you, with whatever following you have as yet."

"Is the invitation your own?"

"No, Mr. Anthony. It shall be confirmed."

"And on whose behalf am I asked to fight?"

"Persia,"

"First, consider your position, Mr. Anthony," he cautioned, holding out a forefinger again. "You dare not go home, even supposing you could escape. There

is a warrant out for you on account of the part you played in Egypt. You are a British officer. You see me here in unexpected encouragement. He looked at Andy and read disappointment on the big man's face. So long as he could speak, Robert Lancaster could voice an argument.

"Will you talk to these patriots, Mr. Anthony, and say a few words to encourage them?"

"Certainly," said Dick. "I'd be glad to talk to them. First, though, I need food for my men, horses and transportation."

"I was coming to that," said Lancaster. He turned to Usheb Ali Khan. "You," he said, "are the best likely of the party to be recognized. Will you be good enough to take my horse and a message I will write to a place about ten miles away from here? My signature under a requisition will be enough to produce everything needed."

"I take my orders from Anthony Sahib," said the Afghan.

Some twenty minutes later Robert Lancaster gave Usheb Ali Khan repeated, definite directions, and the Afghan drove his heels in. The horse leaped forward like a shaft bow driven.

If Dick Anthony supposed that by escaping out of Russia into Persia he had shaken off the Princess Olga Karageorgovich, that was a clear proof of his ignorance of women.

The Princess Olga had taken leave of him, a little ostentatiously, on the deck of the Russian tramp at Trebizond; and, though he had been certain that it was his voice whispering orders through a hole in a wall at Baku, he felt quite sure now that pride must have come to her aid and have made her see the impropriety of following him further.

Fate piled the odds a hundred high against Dick Anthony when Olga Karageorgovich, princess of Russia, and arch enemy for Russia's under-world—whose power was the strength of the Okhrana, whose youth and beauty were twin foils for her ambition, loveliness, most versatile, least unworldly of all women—set her heart on him.

While Cossack officers still cursed the stern of a boat that disappeared into a Caspian hurricane, she was already sending telegrams. Questions and replies, orders and acknowledgments, Dick's minute description, even to his scars, flashed back and forth through a whole storm-shrieking night.

Five evenings later she and her maid kept their united genius to the task of dressing her for a ball that was all but quite official.

She danced with a dozen men whose breasts were a blaze of decorations, and she found her way at last to a sitting-out place between half tropical ferns and flowers on the arm of a man who wore no decorations.

"Well," he asked, when he had satisfied himself that none could overhear. "Is this to be another Egypt? More millions of rubles, more promises, still less result?"

"I have done my utmost in each instance," said the princess, divining that she stood on the verge of danger. "Certain other precautions have been taken this time," he said. "Anthony meets with approval—the very first brand for the business—but your plan goes into the discard. Yes, we have a better plan."

"Have I a part in it?" she asked with a little display of interest as she dared show.

"Yes, once again," he added darkly.

"Go, Tell the Czar!"

pointed straight at Dick. "We have been waiting for a man for the man!"

"To do what?"

"To lead whom?"

"I mean, Mr. Anthony, that the patriots, the few good, loyal men who love Persia and would fight for her, dare not show themselves for fear of Russia. Most of them are in hiding in the mountains—many of them not very far from here. Take command of these men, drive the Cossacks out of northern Persia by quick, stern action, and within two weeks you will have the whole of Persia at your back, and the Great Powers (God forbid, remember, by chance) behind Persia. All that are needed are the courage and the initial heroic effort!"

"It's tempting enough," laughed Dick. "supposing, of course, that you could give your authority for making promises. Your firm, suppose, would ship arms and ammunition, and I haven't a doubt they could be smuggled. I'd like the adventure. But I must refuse as a

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"Yes, once again," he added darkly.

"Put your hands up!"

The soldier spoke in Russian, but Dick understood him.

"Shed, if you feel that way," he said in English; then he leaped his horse forward, feeling nearly certain that the Russian would not dare.

At the sound of voices his whole party, except Lancaster, started. The Russian came cantering up. Then a Cossack officer showed himself in the middle of the gap and said something in a quiet voice to the man who had challenged; for answer, the rifle butt went to the ground again.

"Have a care, Sahib!" whispered Usheb Ali Khan. "See the smoke of twenty fires beyond the hills. They be many and we be but ten, for Lancaster Sahib is no fighter—he hides already among the baggage animals."

"Are you certain we're in Persia?" Dick asked.

"Surely, Bahadur!"

Dick's strange eyes blazed, and had the Russian had the luck to see him once or twice in a fighting mood, as Andy had, and he would have been called up to his regiment; then and there, and finished the trouble before it could properly begin. But he made the mistake of thinking Dick an ordinary man; and he let himself be taken in by the very little attitude.

"For the love of Scotland, give me a weapon, somebody," said Andy in fierce undertones, and Usheb Ali Khan slipped him a dagger. The rest loosened their sabres in the scabbards and looked to their automatic pistols when they judged the Russian's eye was not on them. Without another word to anybody Dick rode on and they pressed in cluster after him.

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ward, on the offensive. As he rode at the head of the fresh dandy and the hoof marks of two or three troops at least. He was quite sure they would not have left their untended officer behind for any length of time. Therefor he was not a bit surprised when he saw the Russian back in Baku know that we have landed, eh?" he reasoned.

"For me—as an Afghan—there would be no orders to hold hard. The Cossacks would have to work their sweat will on